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NEOLIBERAL IMPERIALISM

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Abstract:

This essay approaches the neoliberal tradition of thought through the lens of liberal imperialism. Seeking to bring scholarship on the history of neoliberal ideas together with research on liberal defenses of empire, I show that the neoliberal tradition of thought contains a number of formal, explicit, and systematic defenses of (European) colonialism. In the first section of the essay I contextualize neoliberal imperialism by showing that many prominent early neoliberals had close ties to the British Colonial Office. I then offer a close reading of two highly influential instances of the neoliberal defense of empire. The first was articulated between the 1930s and 40s by Herbert Frankel, who saw colonization as a form of civilizational improvement that places a heavy ethical and political burden on the colonizer. The second was articulated by Lewis Gann and Peter Duignan between the 1960s and 70s. In contrast to Frankel's civilizational justification of colonialism, Gann and Duignan articulated a more dispassionate cost-benefit argument, claiming that colonialism's advantages outweighed its disadvantages. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications of this shift from a civilizational to a consequentialist frame both for the neoliberal tradition and for liberal imperialist discourse at large.

Keywords: neoliberalism; liberal imperialism; liberalism; colonialism; race

> The curtain has only just risen on the African scene—the drama has yet to be played.
>
> Indeed, the twentieth century opens the era of constructive and creative activity by Western powers in Africa. (Frankel 1938: 429)

> What Nkrumah called neocolonialism was, for the neoliberals, a project. (Whyte 2020: 120)

Introduction

In this essay I propose the term 'neoliberal imperialism' as a means to study the range of formal defenses of (Western) colonialism to which the neoliberal intellectual movement has given rise. In outlining the idea of neoliberal imperialism, I have two principal aims. First, I aim to connect the history of neoliberalism, understood as a distinct and well-defined twentieth and twenty-first-century branch of liberal theory (Plehwe & Mirowski 2009; Burgin 2012; Biebricher 2018; Slobodian 2018; Whyte 2020), to the liberal imperialist tradition that recent scholarship in the history of political thought has done much to chart (Mehta 1999; Pitts 2005; Mantena 2010; Morefield 2014; Bell 2016). I argue that we need to see neoliberalism as a key chapter in the liberal imperialist tradition and investigate not only what influence that tradition has exerted on neoliberal ideas but also how neoliberal thinkers have impacted that tradition in turn.

Second, in fleshing out and critically engaging the concept of neoliberal imperialism, I seek to trace the theoretical composition of two distinct defenses of imperialism that were articulated by early neoliberal thinkers. I focus first on the writings of Herbert Frankel (1903–1996) and then on the co-authored work of Lewis Gann (1924–1997) and Peter Duignan (1926–2012). While Frankel's interwar and post-war writings on empire contained the clear echoes of early

twentieth-century imperialist ideology, which cast European colonization as a civilizing force and which saw colonial statecraft as an exercise in developmental paternalism, Gann and Duignan's most important works on the topic, composed in the 1960s and 70s, instead relied upon a seemingly more dispassionate consequentialist logic according to which empire's boons had outweighed its harms. My first contention will be that this shift from a paternalistic to a consequentialist defense of empire left a lasting imprint on neoliberal thought more specifically, setting the template for later neoliberal justifications of empire, as articulated by writers like Peter Bauer, Niall Ferguson, and Deepak Lal. My second contention will be that Gann and Duignan's work also left a lasting mark on late twentieth-century liberal imperialism at large, reflecting a broader discursive shift toward more muted and less explicitly racialized defenses of empire, which remains dominant among liberal imperialists today.

In putting forward these arguments, I am building on two bodies of scholarship. The first of these, which has flourished particularly in Anglophone debates on the history of political ideas, engages with and critically deconstructs the liberal imperialist tradition (Mehta 1999; Pitts 2005; 2010; Fitzpatrick 2012; Mantena 2010; Morefield 2014; Bell 2016; 2020). This tradition, as its critics have reconstructed it, stretches as far back as John Locke's apology for settler colonialism in the Americas but reached its apogee in nineteenth-century Britain, the age in which such diverse liberal thinkers as James Mill, John Stuart Mill, Henry Maine, and Lord Macaulay all rallied in defense of the British Empire's role as an engine of progress and civilization.[1] It is understandable, then, that much of this scholarship concentrates on nineteenth-century liberal thinkers and ideas. A key exception to this focus is Jeanne

[1] My intention is not to present this body of scholarship as more internally homogenous than it is. Indeed, much conceptual and interpretative disagreement persists between the scholars cited here. For a helpful overview of the field that offers a gentle critique of some of its most common assumptions, see for example Bell 2016, ch. 2.

Morefield's searching study, *Empires without Imperialism*, which compares early twentieth-century European imperialist thought to its early twenty-first-century North-American progeny (Morefield 2014). Yet even Morefield's analysis leaves the period stretching from the Second World War to the dawn of the new millennium unexplored. And while she convincingly argues that Niall Ferguson's imperialist writings owe a significant debt to neoliberal ideas (Morefield 2014, chapter 4), her study does not engage in a systematic way with the broader tradition of neoliberal thought to which Ferguson's work belongs. This, then, is a contribution the present essay seeks to make. Focusing on mid-twentieth-century (neo)liberal thought, this essay seeks to trace one genealogical connection tying the liberal imperialisms of the Victorian and Edwardian age to that of a more recent author like Ferguson and shows that the primary locus of this connection is the neoliberal tradition.

This is where my argument links up to a second body of scholarship. This scholarship revolves around the history of neoliberalism, understood primarily as a tradition of thought more or less consciously assembled by a 'neoliberal thought collective' (Plehwe, Walpen & Neunhöffer 2006; Plehwe & Mirowski 2009; Plehwe, Mirowski & Slobodian 2020). Intellectual historians working in this field have done much to chart, contextualize, and assess the ideas that make up the neoliberal tradition (Cooper 2017; Biebricher 2018; Whyte 2020). Among other things, they have shown that the neoliberal tradition is much less single-mindedly focused on free markets or the figure of the entrepreneur than previous scholarship on the subject has suggested. This is not to suggest that an idealized conception of the free market is not central to neoliberal thinking. Indeed, many neoliberal arguments pivot on such a conception and are marked out by it. It is to say, instead, that neoliberalism constitutes a comprehensive philosophical school that speaks not only to economic themes but also to a wide range of other questions, including, to name but a few, the family (Cooper 2017), democracy (Cornelissen

2017; Biebricher 2018), historiography (Noronha 2019), and even race (Slobodian 2018; Cornelissen 2020; Kundnani 2021).

Another theme that is threaded through the neoliberal tradition of thought is that of colonialism and decolonization. Indeed, as Dieter Plehwe (2009), José Francisco Puello-Socarrás (2013), Quinn Slobodian (2018), Jessica Whyte (2020), and Arun Kundnani (2021) have variously argued, many neoliberals writing in the decades following the Second World War conceived of the ongoing wave of decolonization as a profound threat to the geopolitical position of the Western bloc that, in their view, demanded a robust political and theoretical response. However, while this scholarship has done much to chart this response, what remains to be studied in detail is how, in their effort to criticize the decolonial movement, many neoliberals also mounted a formal and principled *defense* of Europe's colonial past. This, then, is where the present essay seeks to make its second contribution. It will study two variations on the neoliberal apology for colonialism and contrast the arguments each bring to the fore.

Before I proceed to discuss these two neoliberal accounts of empire, however, it is important to spend some time exploring the context in which the early neoliberals were writing. I thus begin my argument, in the next section, by situating the early neoliberal movement both in its historical context more generally and in relation to the British Empire more specifically.

The Neoliberal Movement and the Colonial Office

If we are to understand not only *how* the early neoliberals approached the question of imperial history but also *why* this question was of such importance to them, we must begin by situating these thinkers in their historical context. As an intellectual and political project that first emerged in the interwar period but that did not consolidate itself into a carefully organized and

densely networked thought collective until after the Second World War, neoliberalism was forged against the background of anti-colonial struggle. It is unsurprising, then, that the end of European empire loomed large over early neoliberal thought (see Puello-Socarrás 2013; Slobodian 2018; Cornelissen 2020; Whyte 2020; Kundnani 2021).

However, it is crucial to emphasize here, as other historians of neoliberalism have also done (Slobodian 2018; Whyte 2020), that the 'end' of empire was less a sudden revolution than a series of successive campaigns for independence; less a singular moment than a long, drawn-out process. What is more, this process had only just started when the neoliberal movement was going through its most formative period. When, at Friedrich Hayek's invitation, the first generation of neoliberals gathered in the Swiss Alps on 1 April 1947, where they would go on to found the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS) and thus provide some organizational coherence to their nascent intellectual project (Plehwe & Mirowski 2009), the post-war wave of decolonization had barely begun. While the Indonesian war of independence had been waging for close to two years, it was still a further two years from its conclusion; what was to become the state of Israel was, at that moment in time, still a British mandate territory; and the Indian Independence Act was still months away from coming into effect. Concisely put, decolonization was very much a live issue, and would remain live for several decades thereafter. After all, insofar as European empire did come to an 'end' after the Second World War, it took the rest of the century to do so.

This context decisively shaped early neoliberal writings on empire and colonialism (Slobodian 2018). For the first-generation neoliberals, the question of the West's colonial legacy remained indeterminate, a strategic object of contention in the war of ideas they believed themselves to be waging. This goes a long way toward explaining why the first-generation neoliberals were focused so closely on colonialism in Africa rather than in Asia or the Americas. It also explains why they devoted so much time and energy to debating the problems posed by

anti-colonialism at MPS meetings (Plehwe 2009). Indeed, they were concerned that if anti-colonial agitators (as well as their allies in the West) were allowed to set the intellectual agenda on these matters, this would serve to undermine the Western bloc's moral authority, which in turn would weaken its position in the context of the Cold War. For the early neoliberals, the effort to rewrite empire's history was not just of intellectual appeal but of world-historical significance, important not just to historians but to the very future of freedom.

Crucially, however, the question of empire's record also harbored a *personal* dimension. Indeed, more than being intellectually invested in empire, many first-generation neoliberals owed research funding, positions of authority, or even their income to the British Colonial Office.[2] This is true, for example, of Peter Bauer, an early member of the MPS whose impact on neoliberal development theory was without equal (see Plehwe 2009; Whyte 2020). As Keith Tribe has observed (Tribe 2018), Bauer wrote two of his most impactful early works, one on the rubber industry in colonial Malaya (Bauer 1948) and another on trade and competition in West Africa (Bauer 1954), at the behest of the British Colonial Office, which had commissioned both studies in an effort to rationalize its colonial development policy (see also Kelemen 2007). Bauer, to whose position on the virtues of colonialism we will return, thus owed much of the academic esteem these books earned him to funding and support provided by the British Empire itself.

[2] For reasons of analytical precision I have focused here on the links between the neoliberal movement and the British Colonial Office. There also existed links between the first-generation neoliberals and other imperial formations. Founding MPS member William E. Rappard, for instance, served as the Secretary to the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations in the 1920s (Whyte 2020), while Edmond Giscard d'Estaing, who joined the MPS in the early 1950s, had a long and distinguished career in the French empire, the apex of which was a report he was commissioned to draft by the colonial ministry in 1932 (see Coquery-Vidrovitch 1979; Thomas 2009).

Bauer was far from the only early neoliberal to be in personal and professional debt to imperial institutions. Several of his neoliberal comrades also completed pieces of research for the Colonial Office. None other than Friedrich Hayek, for example, accepted a commission by the Colonial Office in 1944 to complete a research survey in Gibraltar (see Grocott 2017; Caldwell & Klausinger 2022: 567–572). And although the handful of reports he authored were not well received by the governors who had commissioned them, Hayek's foray into colonial development policy appears to have provided him with an opportunity to test out the ideas he had only recently outlined in *The Road to Serfdom* (Grocott 2017). Lewis Gann, a neoliberal historian and archivist whose writings will be discussed in more detail below, occupied a series of research positions in colonial research institutes in southern Africa during the first decade of his career. He started his career at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Northern Rhodesia (contemporary Zambia), where he authored his first book, a study of that colony's history (Gann 1958). Several years later, Gann took up a position at the national archives of the short-lived Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (contemporary Zambia, Malawi, and Zimbabwe) and while there was commissioned by the Colonial Office to author two further studies, which dealt with the history of Northern Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia respectively (Gann 1965; Gann 1969).

Other neoliberals served Britain's imperial interests by other means. In 1949, for instance, the Colonial Office appointed Arthur Shenfield, a British barrister and an early member of the MPS who was to become its President in 1972, to the position of economic advisor to the governor of Trinidad (see Clarke 2018). Shenfield's primary task was to spur the colony's industrial development, and his effort to do so hinged on the roll-out of a new policy framework designed to make Trinidad more attractive to foreign capital by lowering tax and slashing import tariffs. Frederic Benham, another early MPS member, a close friend of Hayek's, and a neoliberal development theorist of some renown, likewise served much of his later career as a

colonial advisor, first to the Comptroller for Development and Welfare in the West Indies between 1942 and 1945 and then to the Commissioner General for the United Kingdom in South East Asia between 1947 and 1955. Like Shenfield, Benham used his influence as a colonial advisor to push neoliberal ideas surrounding colonial development, for instance by advising the Colonial Office in 1945 not to industrialize Jamaica's economy and focus on its agricultural sector instead (see Figueroa 2009).

If each of these neoliberals owed some of their academic or professional esteem to the Colonial Office, none owed it quite as much as Herbert Frankel (Tribe 2018). The son of a moderately wealthy entrepreneur from South Africa and a personal friend of prominent imperialist Jan Smuts (see Getachew 2019), Frankel came to specialize in colonial economics in the interwar period. In the late 1930s, he was recruited as part of the commission that was to compose the African Survey, a singularly impactful report that was led by Lord Hailey and that left an indelible mark on both colonial anthropology and colonial economics (see Mills 2002). Hailey put Frankel in charge of drafting the section of the Survey that dealt with economic issues, and the resulting study was published separately in 1938 as *Capital Investment in Africa*. This book decisively cemented Frankel's reputation in the field of colonial economics. Shortly after the Second World War, Frankel was appointed the newly created chair of Colonial Economic Affairs at the University of Oxford, a post that was funded in part by the Colonial Office,[3] where he was tasked with training personnel for the colonial services. In the early 1950s, Frankel was recruited as part of another prominent colonial commission, the East Africa Royal Commission, which published its findings in 1955. This survey failed to leave a significant mark on colonial governance, however, if only because by the time it was concluded

[3] As he later recalled in his autobiography, Frankel secured the remainder of the funds needed to establish his chair from his close personal friend, Ernest Oppenheimer, an entrepreneur who made his fortune in diamond mining in South Africa (Frankel 1992: 229).

it was plain for British officials to see that East Africa stood on the threshold of independence and that it would be risky to pursue any rash policy shifts at that time (Hood 1997). This reflected a broader pattern: as the Empire was entering its twilight years, the designs and ideas of colonial economists were rapidly becoming irrelevant. This was certainly true of Frankel's own professional influence—as may be seen in the very title of his Chair, which was changed from 'Colonial Economic Affairs' to 'Commonwealth Economic Affairs' in 1956 and then again to 'The Economics of Underdeveloped Countries' in 1963 (see Frankel 1992: 275).

In short, if the British Empire left a firm imprint on the careers and thought of the early neoliberals, the neoliberals, in turn, left their own mark on the Empire, crafting 'imperial careers' (Lambert & Lester 2006: 2) for themselves as advisors to, researchers in, or teachers for the colonial services. Differently put, the fledgling neoliberal project was not just supportive of but closely enmeshed with the British imperial project. And the late empire provided some first-generation neoliberals, such as Hayek, Benham, Shenfield, and Frankel, with a convenient laboratory in which to test out some of their policy ideas and economic theories. Many decades before the violent rise of Pinochet, let alone the emergence of Thatcherism or Reaganism, the neoliberal movement was already leaving its mark on policy, seizing the opportunities provided by Britain's waning Empire to unleash their nascent political philosophy onto colonial populations.

History, Civilization, and Colonial Statesmanship in Frankel

Although his career spanned some six decades, Frankel made his most significant contributions to economic theory between the 1930s and 50s, which is also the period during which his work was heavily sponsored by the Colonial Office. His primary focus during these decades was

African colonial economics (Toye 2009). Crucially, however, for him the field of colonial economics also encompassed questions of a more directly political nature, speaking to what he tended to call 'colonial statesmanship.' What, Frankel's early work asked, ought the objectives and priorities of colonial government to be? How should its agents relate to the local population and its well-being? And, pulling these two together, what makes for a good colonial statesman? Frankel's early writings, in short, contained a systematic political theory of colonial governance, a practical philosophy that set out how to exercise colonial power and to which ends.

In outlining his conception of colonial statesmanship, Frankel proceeded by distancing himself from what he depicted as the established attitude to colonial control, which saw colonies almost exclusively in terms of economic gain. In Frankel's view, this attitude, which prioritized profit over any other objective, inexorably led to ruthless exploitation and extraction and amounted to little more than a systematized form of 'Raubwirtschaft' (Frankel 1938: 34). Under this attitude, he noted in a 1932 lecture, 'there is no thought for the future at all' (Frankel 1932: 4) as the entire colonial state is made subject to the short-term needs of capital. This model, Frankel explained, inevitably ran into 'humanitarian opposition' (Frankel 1932: 5) since it required ruthless oppression to function, but it also encountered more strictly economic limits since it essentially amounted to an irrational and indeed destructive use of capital, 'and this meant killing the goose for the eggs' (Frankel 1938: 35).

Frankel presented his own conception of colonial statesmanship as a more economically sound and morally tenable alternative to this model, explicitly framing it as a 'new colonial philosophy' (Frankel 1932: 8). This philosophy was rooted in the view that colonial rule should have as its end not the enrichment of the colonizer but the economic and cultural uplift of the colonized, the effort to raise their 'culture to a higher level of human personality, dignity and achievement' (Frankel 1932: 8). Thus, in his view, the relationship between colonizer and colonized is one of responsibility. It is an ethical relationship as well as an economic and political

one. Indeed, any feasible colonial philosophy, he argued in *Capital Investment in Africa*, ought to be 'based on the realization of a definite responsibility for [Africa's] inhabitants and some endeavour to inaugurate constructive activities for the future' (Frankel 1938: 39).[4]

For Frankel, then, the primary objective of colonial rule must always be development. But what precisely does colonial development entail? In Frankel's view, development was not simply a matter of capital investment or industrial expansion; rather, it involved a process of far-reaching cultural, philosophical, and institutional transformation. According to this model, development required that the native population's entire system of shared beliefs, customs, and attitudes be refashioned, as those habits that are inimical to modern economic activity had to make way for alternative, more conducive ones. In Frankel's own words:

> Under the impact of the dynamic economic forces of the West, the indigenous peoples of Africa, like those of the East, are compelled to develop a new social order to take the place of their closed, static, undifferentiated and self-sufficient economies. These must give way to those innumerable forces which increase the

[4] It is worth noting here that Frankel held this responsibility to be specific to the contemporary African colonial context and to the East-Asian context before it. For him, such a responsibility did not apply to the history of colonial settlement in the Americas, where the problem of colonization had taken shape differently. As he wrote in a particularly repellent passage from *Capital Investment in Africa*: "If the indigenous population had disappeared before the advance of the white man, as the Indian did in America, and if its climate had favoured European settlement, as in large parts of that continent, the problem of European colonization might indeed have been capable of the same almost automatic solution. Actually, in most parts of Africa, instead of a decadent population, rapidly tending to extinction, the intending settlers encountered a race virile, increasing and racially potent" (Frankel 1938, 8).

> range of individual and social action, and which broaden the ideas and heighten the creative possibilities of the citizen in a wider society. To realize this is the key to colonial statesmanship. (Frankel 1938: 7)

Colonial development, differently put, is the work of preparing a colony for integration into the global market economy, principally by opening it up to foreign investment, extraction, and market activity.

It was in this conception of colonial development that Frankel's theory of colonization most clearly revealed its neoliberal leanings. Indeed, for Frankel, development was synonymous with the construction of a free market system, which he theorized along familiar neoliberal lines. On this view, the embrace of the market order allows for a more complex division of labor, expands the horizon of individual choice, unleashes entrepreneurial energy, carves out avenues for foreign investment, stimulates material growth, and, most importantly of all, makes historical progress possible. By contrast, economic intervention or central planning by the (colonial) state is not only inefficient but dangerous, undermining the principle of free exchange and, indeed, development itself, which can only ever 'result from those innumerable, and as yet dimly comprehended, agencies which lie embedded in society itself' (Frankel 1953: 14). Accordingly, for Frankel, the true objective of colonial development was to introduce into the colonized society the basic conditions for the emergence of a free-market society. This, as students of neoliberalism have long emphasized, is a quintessentially neoliberal idea (see Biebricher 2018; Slobodian 2018; Whyte 2020).

Importantly, however, its application to the context of *colonial* statecraft gave this idea a unique twist. Indeed, for Frankel, the greatest obstacle to colonial development would not be monopoly formation, the influence of labor unions, or the social challenges of mass democracy, issues that occupied most of his neoliberal colleagues during this period, but the very structure

of indigenous society as such. On this account, for a colonized society to become hospitable to the market mechanism many of its indigenous traditions, institutions, and material practices would require *not just gradual reform but active destruction*. Frankel was candid about this: 'The real problem of colonization is therefore the problem of knowing at what rate to bring about modifications or to destroy, and how to replace what has been destroyed' (Frankel 1932: 7). In other words, more than requiring the establishment of a legal and institutional framework conducive to a competitive order, colonial development necessitated a process of far-reaching, intensive, and unavoidably violent cultural change. It entailed a program of destructive creation, a series of highly invasive biopolitical interventions targeted not just at the bodies and shared institutions but also the very cultural world of the colonized. Inevitably disruptive and violent, colonial development 'can be regarded as a forcing-house of civilization' (Frankel 1953: 8).

It was precisely because development was inevitably a violent, disruptive, and delicate process that it required a colonial state even to be possible. Indeed, for Frankel, the process of development could not be entrusted to the colonized themselves, since the political and cultural changes it required were too complex and demanding to fall within their grasp. 'It is absurd to assume," he contended, "that this knowledge and these enormous changes can be left to the initiative of the Native peoples themselves. European civilization is essential to the development of Africa' (Frankel 1932: 7). As he put it as late as 1950: 'Africa has become a problem of world statesmanship: the 'White Man's Burden' has become the burden of the free world in much more than metaphorical terms' (Frankel 1953: 139). Colonialism was not just economically or politically beneficial; it was world-historically necessary.

This is also why, for Frankel, colonial statesmanship was such a vexatious and morally demanding vocation. Colonization, to him, was an exceedingly difficult task that demanded of colonial governors that they 'endeavour to act impartially and to bring the full power of their

national cultures to bear in holding the scales evenly' (Frankel 1932: 9). Indeed, in Frankel's view, colonial rule was so morally and culturally demanding that only the most civilized, developed, and morally restrained of cultures were capable of shouldering the 'burdensome pursuit' of acting as a responsible 'guardian' toward its subject population (Frankel 1953: 16).

We are now in a better position to assess Frankel's apology for empire. As we have seen, Frankel was a staunch defender of the West's colonial record, arguing that on the whole, European colonialism had been an engine of progress and civilization. 'The positive achievements of the colonizing powers,' he wrote in the conclusion to *Capital Investment in Africa*, 'have been innumerable; those who belittle these achievements do not grasp the essence of the revolution which has swept over Africa, and which heralds a new era for its inhabitants' (Frankel 1938: 421). Yet Frankel's defense of colonialism went well beyond such a straightforward cost-benefit argument. Indeed, he explicitly warned against assessing Europe's colonial record solely on the basis of such reasoning, noting that the desirability of colonialism 'cannot be decided on economic principles or according to the method of striking a balance sheet of profit and loss' (Frankel 1938: 423). In Frankel's opinion, not only did such a perspective risk lapsing into the kind of economistic and exploitative imperialism of the late nineteenth century, but it also failed to appreciate the moral and civilizational dimension of colonization.

If Frankel's work marked the beginning of a distinctly *neoliberal* contribution to the history of imperialist thought, then initially this contribution was written in the grammar of moral responsibility, civilizational uplift, and world-historical duty. Evidently, Frankel's position on the moral desirability and developmental necessity of colonialism owed much to what Duncan Bell has identified as 'civilizational' justifications of empire, which hold 'that empire is legitimate if (and only if) it is primarily intended to benefit the populations subjected to it' and which argue that enlightened imperial rule should aim at 'cognitive, affective, and behavioral

transformation through expert liberal tutelage' (Bell 2016: 52). Himself a teacher of colonial officials, Frankel's work was explicitly structured around such a vision of tutelage. His was, in both structure and affect, a paternalistically oriented imperialism.

Crucially, however, Frankel was writing during a time when this line of argument was becoming increasingly untenable. As the post-war wave of decolonization gathered momentum and as, among Western elites, general attitudes toward questions of race, colonialism, and global order shifted, at least on a surface level (see Bessis 2003; Hall 2021), the straightforward enthusiasm for colonization that Frankel's writings evinced soon came to be seen as an outworn opinion, a relic of the Victorian period that had no place in post-war polite society. For a man like Frankel, this implied that his career as a colonial economist and advisor was nearing its end. For the neoliberal movement more generally, it implied that it needed to adjust the terms in which it was to formulate its apology for European colonialism.

Empire and History in Gann and Duignan

If Frankel's professional life reached its zenith during the twilight decades of the British Empire, and can thus be mapped onto the post-war decolonization of Africa, the same cannot be said for Lewis Gann and Peter Duignan's careers. Having been born in 1924 and 1926 respectively, Gann and Duignan could not start their academic careers until after the Second World War, in which both men served, had concluded.[5] By that point, Europe's formal colonial reach was rapidly declining, even as the discursive landscape surrounding questions of empire was steadily

[5] Gann was born in Germany but his family moved to Britain in 1938 and he fought for Britain in the war.

shifting. It is unsurprising, then, that Gann and Duignan's generational positioning left a distinct mark on the way they articulated their apology for empire.

Gann himself reflected on this positioning in a revealing autobiographical essay published in 1993. As he recalled there, he 'belong[ed] to the last generation which, at one time, wished to serve the British Empire' (Gann 1993: 477). After completing a modern history degree at the University of Oxford, where he studied under Herbert Frankel and immersed himself in Peter Bauer's work (Gann 1993: 481), Gann managed to secure two professional positions in service of the Empire, first as a researcher for the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, based in what was then Northern Rhodesia, and then as an archivist for the National Archives of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. He recalled being especially pleased with the latter position: 'I now became a civil servant in the service of the Federation, a shaky structure put together as Britain's last imperial bastion against both Afrikanerdom to the south and emergent black nationalism elsewhere' (Gann 1993: 483). It was during his time in the Federation, in 1959, that Gann met Duignan. The two men quickly bonded over their many shared intellectual passions, including, most decisively, 'a certain pessimism […] with regard to the passing of empire' (Gann 1993: 486).

Within a year of meeting, Gann and Duignan had already co-authored a piece in which they directly addressed the theme of colonialism (Gann & Duignan 1960), and within three they had written a book on the topic (Gann & Duignan 1962). Around the same time, Duignan was hired by the Hoover Institution in Stanford, California, a prestigious neoliberal think tank that was about to enter a period of significant growth, where he was appointed the new curator for the Institution's Africa Collection. Shortly thereafter, Duignan was given the resources to expand the Africa Collection as well as to hire several new research fellows. One of the people that was hired this way was his friend Gann, who joined the Hoover Institution in 1963 and who stayed there until he retired in 1995. Duignan joined the Mont Pèlerin Society in 1982,

after having presented a paper celebrating Europe's colonial record at its 1978 meeting in Hong Kong (which, fittingly, was then still a British colony), thus fully cementing the neoliberal credentials of his and Gann's work on the subject.

Across their largely interweaving careers, Gann and Duignan published a great number of essays, books, papers, and edited volumes, many of which they co-authored. One of the most pronounced thematic threads running through their work was a spirited defense of Europe's colonial history. This theme was already present in their first co-authored book, *White Settlers in Tropical Africa*, which was explicitly framed as a historical and political defense of the titular settlers (Gann & Duignan 1962). They reproduced and refined the line of argument set out there across many subsequent writings, but arguably their most decisive contribution to the liberal imperialist tradition was made in their 1967 book *Burden of Empire: An Appraisal of Western Colonialism in Africa South of the Sahara*. It was in the pages of this sizeable volume that Gann and Duignan most systematically and rigorously laid out their apology for, as the title suggests, the period of Western colonial rule in southern Africa. It is worth, therefore, reconstructing the main claims made there in some detail.

Originally published in 1967 and reprinted with a new Preface in 1971, *Burden of Empire* set out to challenge what its authors took be a skewed intellectual consensus surrounding the moral and historical record of European colonialism in Africa. The book, a draft of which had been read by Peter Bauer, adopted a quintessentially neoliberal position on anti-colonial discourse, which it presented as rhetorically exaggerated and politically dangerous. Thus, taking aim at what they called 'something like a postcolonial climate of opinion' (Gann & Duignan 1971: xiii) that saw colonialism in Africa as an irredeemably violent, exploitative, and racist project, Gann and Duignan argued instead that the imperial age had been the high point of Africa's history. They framed this argument as a simple summative exercise in which colonialism's advantages and disadvantages would all be tallied up. 'In our view,' they concluded their book, 'the

imperial system stands out as one of the most powerful engines for cultural diffusion in the history of Africa; its credit balance by far outweighs its debit account' (Gann & Duignan 1971: 382).

As is plain from this quote, Gann and Duignan's defense of colonialism in Africa pivoted on a consequentialist logic. For all of its faults and downsides, they argued, colonialism had overwhelmingly been a force for good because it had brought more benefits than it had caused harms. In sketching out what they called empire's 'credit account' (Gann & Duignan 1971: 372), the authors elaborated a range of examples. The colonizers, they insisted, had brought to African societies not only such material and social benefits as railways, modern medicine, capital, and institutions, but also a host of more intangible boons, such as Western ideas, new economic practices, modern scientific methods, and even the very practice of historical study upon which their own book relied. In their own words:

> Imperial rule involved a vast transfer of human and physical capital to Africa. Much of Africa benefited not merely from enormous private and public investment in brick and mortar, but also from a great transfer of human abilities to Africa. The efforts made by privately subsidized mission societies and similar organizations alone form an outstanding chapter in the history of civilization. (Gann & Duignan 1971: 371)

Like Frankel's justification of colonialism, Gann and Duignan's 'balance-sheet' approach was underpinned by a recognizably neoliberal emphasis on, first, the importance to colonial development of free markets and, second, the harm caused to such development by central planning. For them, as for their South African predecessor (on whose work they relied heavily), one of colonialism's most lasting consequences in Africa was that it had served to economically

modernize the continent, stimulating foreign investment and private enterprise, improving agricultural techniques, and opening up new domestic and international markets, thus finally raising African economies above 'a subsistence level' (Gann & Duignan 1971: 146). And while, on this account, the economic development stimulated by different colonial regimes was uneven, depending largely on how strictly each regime adhered to free-trade principles (see Gann & Duignan 1971: ch. 15), the net effect of the colonial project was that it had served to integrate Africa into the world economy and introduce its populations to the market system, which gradually supplanted traditional economic forms. Thus, 'as European economic influence [in Africa] grew so did markets. […] As the market principle spread and as new technologies and new forms of social and economic organization were implanted on the soil of Africa, so did traditional institutions and ways of life, values and attitudes give way' (Gann & Duignan 1975: 65–66). From a neoliberal perspective, the colonial era brought Westernization, which brought marketization, the surest sign that civilization had finally taken root.

Importantly, however, their 'balance-sheet' approach to Europe's imperial record also required of Gann and Duignan that they account for colonialism's darker side. In other words, they were forced by the structure of their own argument to concede that colonial conquest in Africa had been accompanied by much violence and destruction. In elaborating on this issue, they variously touched upon the slave trade, racial segregation, regimes of forced labor, and instances of colonial brutality and violent suppression. This is not to say, however, that Gann and Duignan treated these forms of colonial violence with any seriousness. Indeed, their treatment of this aspect of Europe's imperial record was cursory and incomplete, making no mention, for instance, of colonial famines, widespread corruption, systemic torture and police brutality, or state-led massacres. If they conceded that colonialism 'had its grim and bloody side' (Gann & Duignan 1971: ix), this was more a rhetorical gesture than a genuine attempt at historical analysis. Theirs was, in other words, a shining example of what Jeanne Morefield has

described as a strategy of disavowal, that is, the effort to 'occlude the violence of imperial history and the experiences of the colonized by constantly bringing the liberal character of the imperial state back to the center of the analysis' (Morefield 2014: 136).

One particularly striking feature of Gann and Duignan's defense of empire was the way it eulogized what they consistently referred to as 'white' settlers. They spent a significant portion of *Burden of Empire* singing the praises of individual European imperialists. With no hint of irony they described David Livingstone as a 'great medical missionary and reformer', called Harry Johnston 'an outstanding administrator, self-taught soldier, and indefatigable writer', and even referred to Cecil Rhodes as 'the greatest of the nineteenth-century empire builders' (Gann & Duignan 1971: 17, 32, 202).[6] However, Gann and Duignan's hagiography of white settlers extended beyond these famous figures to include virtually all imperialists of European descent, who, in their words, 'collectively stand out as one of the most remarkable groups of people who ever left their home countries to shoulder the 'white man's burden' overseas' (Gann & Duignan 1971, 285–286). As is plain, Gann and Duignan's paean for white settlers was conspicuously racialized: in this passage as elsewhere (see especially Gann & Duignan 1962: ch. 4), the colonizers' *whiteness* is underscored as much as their *settlership*. Theirs was an apology not just for white imperials, then, but also for imperial whiteness.

When read alongside and contrasted to Frankel's work, Gann and Duignan's defense of empire has a noticeably distinct texture. To be sure, there is some clear thematic overlap between the two. Specifically, it was in its celebratory account of white settlers that Gann and Duignan's work on colonialism came closest to Frankel's and most conspicuously reproduced the Kiplingesque rhetoric, moralistic affect, and racialized language that also suffused his writings. Yet the crucial difference is that the argument forwarded in *Burden of Empire* did not

[6] In his autobiographical essay, Gann was to remark that in this period of his career he was an emphatic advocate of Cecil Rhodes's assimilationist philosophy (see Gann 1993: 484).

pivot logically on these factors. Gann and Duignan's defense of the imperial record ultimately rested not on a neo-Victorian concern with colonial statecraft and ethical responsibility but on a consequentialist calculation, the historical 'balance sheet', upon which the uniquely moral character of most white settlers played a role but did not decisively tip the scales. In the final analysis, theirs was less a comprehensive political theory of colonial statecraft than an exercise in revisionist historiography.

One straightforward reason for this contrast is that Gann and Duignan were writing in a different historical context. Composed after most of Africa had secured its independence, their apology for colonialism had to be in the past tense. Another is that as historians and archivists, Gann and Duignan sought to intervene in the historical record, whereas Frankel, a professor of colonial economics, wrote from a pedagogical perspective, his writings calculated to reshape Britain's approach to colonial statecraft. I would venture, however, that aside from these contextual factors there was also a decisive strategic element at play here. Gann and Duignan sought to provide the (neo)liberal defense of empire with renewed discursive foundations by emptying it of the moralistic paternalism that had still pervaded the thinking of Frankel's generation. They were quite explicit in this regard, writing in the original Preface to *Burden of Empire* that their aim was to distance the historiography of empire from 'the smug moralizing which led so many Victorians to describe Africans as lesser breeds' (Gann & Duignan 1971: xiv).

In one sense, then, Gann and Duignan's defense of empire marked a significant departure from Frankel's. It was composed at an altogether different moment, for another kind of audience, and with its own distinct objectives. It made sure, at least rhetorically, to distance itself from the paternalistic affect that structured Frankel's imperialist philosophy. And it presented itself as an intervention not into the ongoing life and reason of the late colonial state but into its historical record. In another sense, however, Gann and Duignan's work presented

a continuation of many of the key themes of Frankel's writings. Like their South African predecessor, the authors of *Burden of Empire* held that colonialism in Africa had been a dignified exercise in civilizational uplift, one of the most worthy chapters in the annals of world history. They also agreed with Frankel that pre-colonial life in southern Africa had been static, miserable, and inherently violent, that European colonialism alone could have led the subcontinent from its condition of primitivity into the modern age, and that violent destruction and harm were lamentable but necessary features of colonial development. And, finally, they strongly echoed Frankel's distinctly neoliberal interpretation not only of the free-market system, which they portrayed as one of colonialism's greatest gifts, but also of central planning, which they rejected in recognizably neoliberal terms. As I interpret it, then, Gann and Duignan's work did not so much reject Frankel's colonial philosophy as rearticulate it, taking several of its constituent parts and providing them with new footing, thus making the neoliberal defense of empire more suited to the intellectual and political climate of their time.

Concluding Remarks

In his 1965 study of the same name, Kwame Nkrumah argued that neo-colonialism operates not only in the economic realm but also in the realms of ideology and culture, where it 'devises innumerable ways to accomplish objectives formerly achieved by naked colonialism' (Nkrumah 1965: 239). My contention is that the discursive contrasts I have identified between Herbert Frankel's civilizationist justification of empire and Lewis Gann and Peter Duignan's consequentialist defense of African colonialism demands to be understood against this background. Much like colonial domination itself, in the age of neo-colonialism, the ideological

justification of empire preferred to travel in disguise, masking its support for European (and indeed white) supremacy behind the seemingly dispassionate language of the 'balance sheet'.

Discursively, this shift had a number of crucial implications, both for neoliberal thinking and for the liberal imperialist tradition writ large. Within the boundaries of neoliberal thought, Gann and Duignan's intervention served principally to provide the neoliberal approach to colonial history not only with new conceptual foundations but also with a distinct rhetorical texture. When it came to issues of empire, the neoliberal movement could now draw upon a new conceptual and historical lexicon to support its imperialist sympathies. Consequently, the generic neoliberal position on Europe's colonial record came largely to resemble the template that Gann and Duignan had put in place, its basic argumentative line being that the era of colonial rule had been justifiable because its boons had outnumbered its harms. This line was reproduced, for example, by Peter Bauer in a slew of essays on the theme of colonialism (see also Whyte 2020), which clearly bore the imprint of Gann and Duignan's thinking. In a 1969 essay entitled 'The Economics of Resentment: Colonialism and Underdevelopment', for instance, Bauer issued a defense of colonial history that rehearsed many of the arguments presented in *Burden of Empire* (of which, it will be recalled, he had read a draft version). And in an essay first published in a 1975 volume edited by Gann and Duignan, Bauer again echoed most of their claims, repeatedly referenced their work (as well as Frankel's), and even adopted the terminology of 'the balance sheet of colonialism' to anchor his argument (Bauer 1975: 653).

Gann and Duignan's impact on neoliberal imperialist thought was by no means restricted to Bauer's work, however, and it continued to inform the writings of a subsequent generation of neoliberals. Immediately following the 9/11 attacks, several latter-day neoliberals, such as Niall Ferguson, himself a Fellow at the Hoover Institution and a Mont Pèlerin Society member, and Deepak Lal, who served as the Society's President between 2008 and 2010, sought to revive the same consequentialist defense of colonialism that had been pioneered in *Burden of Empire*.

Both Ferguson's infamous page-turner (and accompanying tv series) *Empire* (Ferguson 2003; see also Morefield 2014) and Lal's less well known screed *In Praise of Empires* (Lal 2004) echoed Gann and Duignan's argument that European colonialism had been a great blessing to world history, having brought more benefit than harm. Both Ferguson and Lal went one step further, however, claiming that the West's colonial past deserved not only to be praised but emulated. For them, nothing short of colonialism's immediate revival could bring peace and prosperity to the Middle East and Africa. Thus neoliberal imperialism made its spectacular return, tailored to the new millennium.

Beyond the bounds of neoliberalism, however, the discursive shift mapped out above also rippled through the liberal imperialist tradition more widely, rearranging the key concepts and rhetorical strategies around which it was structured. Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, the kind of consequentialist apology of colonialism that Gann and Duignan developed in their writings, as well as many of the specific arguments they rallied in its support, became increasingly dominant staples of liberal imperialist discourse, rhetorical tricks that allowed empire's apologists to voice their support for the history of European dominance 'while all the while avoiding charges of illiberality and racial hubris' (Morefield 2014: 153).

What is more, in recent years Gann and Duignan's writings have experienced something of a revival in liberal imperialist circles. In a lurid and rightly denounced article that was initially published in 2017 in *South Atlantic Quarterly* before being retracted by the editors, Bruce Gilley mounted a case for colonialism that not only reproduced Gann and Duignan's consequentialist logic point by point but that also singled out *Burden of Empire* as a shining example of the type of pro-imperialist historiography to which Gilley himself aspired. In a more recent work, an equally repellent book on the boons of German colonialism, Gilley once again went out of his way to praise Gann and Duignan's work (Gilley 2022: 52). Similarly enthusiastic about Gann and Duignan's revisionist historiography is Nigel Biggar, whose recent foray into imperialist

apologetics, *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning*, not only routinely invokes *Burden of Empire* as a reliable historical source whose 'general thesis' on the historical advantages of colonialism was essentially correct but also deploys many of the rhetorical tricks and slights of hand that Gann and Duignan did so much to systematize (Biggar 2023: 361n22). And although Biggar explicitly distances himself from balance-sheet assessments of empire, his consistent reliance on their work and its underlying rhetorical strategy serves to underscore Gann and Duignan's lasting impact on the contemporary imperialist imaginary.

To conclude, there should be no doubt that there exists a sizeable intellectual tradition that may usefully be termed 'neoliberal imperialism'. This tradition encompasses selected writings, reports, and policy interventions by each of the neoliberals engaged in this essay, most prominently Herbert Frankel, Lewis Gann, Peter Duignan, Friedrich Hayek, Arthur Shenfield, Frederic Benham, Peter Bauer, Niall Ferguson, and Deepak Lal, as well as a considerable number of other neoliberal intellectuals I was not able to include here. The sheer size and continuing impact of neoliberal imperialist thought, as well as the intimate ties between the neoliberal movement and the British Colonial Office that I have sought to chart, would suggest that there exist significant gaps in our understanding both of twentieth and twenty-first-century (neo-)colonialism and of the neoliberal project. Evidently, the neoliberal imperialist tradition is in urgent need of systematic critical analysis, providing a crucial missing link in the story of how, as Kojo Koram has recently written, '[t]he trend towards privatization, deregulation and corporatization that, in the West, we came to know as neoliberalism, began in the post-colonies after the end of empire' (Koram 2022: 225).

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